

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* metamorphosed

Rebecca Tatlow

In this article, for which she was awarded the 2008 *Omnibus* Gladstone Essay Prize, Rebecca Tatlow looks at the way later writers have taken up and played with stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and finds the perennial appeal of stories of how love changes lives.

In the *MetAMORphoses* Ovid explores all sorts of aspects of the human condition, but at the centre of the poem is love (*amor*). Much English literature shows the mark of Ovid's stories – but then so too do our own lives.

The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe

Among the tales which the daughters of Minyas tell, to while away the time whilst weaving, Ovid includes the story of how 'Pyramus and Thisbe' eloped. He describes how the two fall in love, despite their parents' enmity, and arrange through a crack in the wall, which divides them, to run away together. Of course, they are doomed, and upon reaching the meeting place, Ninus' tomb, Thisbe is frightened away by a lioness which tears her veil. Pyramus, who has been delayed, arrives to find no trace of his love, except the veil, and kills himself in desperation, convinced that the maiden has been savaged. The scene which greets Thisbe, when she overcomes her fear, is one of bloody death; Pyramus' spurting blood has dyed the fruit of a neighbouring mulberry-tree crimson. Thisbe promptly dispatches herself, falling on her lover's sword. The whole tale emphasizes the passion and the irrational impulses often produced by love.

Pyramus and Thisbe provided later authors with a paradigm of young lovers who tragically die due to a misunderstanding. Many, such as Chaucer, have focused on the waste of youth and the romance of first love. This is clearest in perhaps the most well-known adaptation, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The star-crossed lovers are separated first by their families and later by the law of the city of Verona, but they finally find themselves united – in death. The lovers' youth is repeatedly emphasized, making the tale more tragic and influencing the audience. There is no doubt where our sympathies

are supposed to lie – it is the world which is to blame, not the youths themselves.

The comic version – Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Shakespeare also offered a more direct, yet also more inventive, retelling of Pyramus and Thisbe's tale in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In this play, Shakespeare translates the classical myth into a comedy. The lovers Hermia and Lysander decide to elope, but 'the course of true love never did run smooth' and they are plagued by the misguided intervention of fairies. Unlike more usual retellings, the wedding eventually takes place, showing that not all separations are permanent and that often lovers are reunited in life as well as death. Mirroring this story of love is the rehearsal and performance of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' by a group of clowning mechanicals. This play within a play is one of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*'s most memorable and comedic episodes, highlighting the conceit of the theatre, and raising profound questions about what the audience gains from watching.

The whole play contains a series of metamorphoses based on Ovid's epic. Shakespeare seems to have read Golding's translation of Ovid and parodies both the elaborate personification of 'the Wall' and the laboured style of Golding's verse: 'This man is Pyramus, if you would know; This beauteous lady Thisbe is, certain.' Shakespeare populates his woods with fairies, just as in the *Metamorphoses* every forest contains a nymph, and Puck is one of the most obviously Ovidian characters. He is either the instigator or instrument of many of the changes which take place, often behaving in a similar manner to Ovid's Mercury – swiftly fetching the 'little western flower', leading the Athenians astray in the night, and induc-

ing slumber. However, Shakespeare subverts his material, declaring 'the story shall be chang'd', deliberately altering it to surprise the audience: 'Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase', in place of King Midas it is 'bully Bottom' the weaver who is crowned with donkey's ears. So too Hermia, the Thisbe figure, finds Lysander vanished and expects the worst. That a group of working men choose the 'lamentable comedy' of 'Pyramus and Thisbe' in which the lovers die as suitable entertainment at a wedding is part of this subversion. Shakespeare skilfully centres his version on rash judgements caused by intense passion, thereby creating 'tragical mirth'.

That lovers might kill themselves, rather than be separated from the object of their affections, can be made to seem either wonderful or ludicrous. Shakespeare stresses the ludicrous in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the wonderful in *Romeo and Juliet*. Many self-help books today still attempt to reconcile the all too well-known story with a reality more often dominated by divorce and voluntary separation. Agony aunts dish out common-sense solutions to embarrassing problems. 'Sit down and talk about it' may not be the magical solution that Pyramus and Thisbe were expecting, but perhaps a sense of perspective might have helped them. But if self-help books insist that a level of dependence, where lovers are ready to commit suicide with such impetuosity, may not be healthy, the persistence of the desire to replicate the ideal, romantic love shows the continuing power of the myth. It is not least Ovid's description of two lovers 'burning alike each with thoughts only for the other' that has enraptured readers and popularised the theme.

Echo and Narcissus

The tragic consequences of an all-consuming love are equally well documented in Ovid's story of 'Echo and Narcissus', powerfully portrayed in Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid*. Echo follows Narcissus like 'a starving wolf' and his rejection causes her to waste away. He in turn is cursed to fall hopelessly in love

with his own reflection and be transformed into a 'quiet woodland flower'. This myth has entered our own culture so successfully that many refer to it with no knowledge of its origins, yet this legend has far more to offer than an explanation for the origin of a particular flower and a strange natural occurrence. It is a story which ultimately damns pride, selfishness, and vanity by highlighting their effects on individuals and the community.

One of the main themes of the myth, which is particularly relevant to modern society, is the transient nature of youth and beauty. The 'gossips' ask 'Can the boy live long with such perfect beauty?' and Narcissus' eventual fate mirrors the natural process of aging. The quest for eternal youth has become a multimillion-pound industry, as people seek to restore their self-esteem by turning back the clock. In Ovid's tale Echo is a chatterbox, punished by Juno for enabling Jupiter to conduct his many affairs without the Queen of Heaven noticing. Hughes omits this to tell a more condensed story. He gives the reader little sense of the more confident and spirited Echo who deceived Juno, she is simply presented as 'pleading' and 'humiliated', in marked contrast with Narcissus' self-absorbed confidence.

Ovid's reflective insights

There is something very modern about the way that Ovid shows how extremes of self-esteem can have damaging effects. All his work is littered with vivid imagery describing the thoughts and feelings of his characters. The plight of Echo is realized particularly effectively, with her isolation and helplessness emphasized. 'All moisture fades from her body into the air' is the succinct but horrifying climax of Echo's tale, the dryness picking up the fire metaphor which symbolizes overwhelming passion throughout. This 'fire' is out of control 'as when quick-burning sulphur smeared round the tips of torches catches fire from another fire brought near' and this unbridled lust ruins the nymph's life. Most of Echo's characterization is necessarily through the description of her thoughts and feelings, as she cannot voice them herself. This makes the reader feel more intimately connected with her and extreme emphasis is placed on all that she does say. The pitiful, sympathetic repetition of Narcissus' last words stands out as a moment of extreme pathos, reflecting the youths' needless deaths. The delightful way Ovid expresses the confusing and conflicting emotions of his characters, whilst not altering the essence of the story, enforces its message by relentlessly engaging the reader's interest throughout.

In Ovid's tale, Narcissus is portrayed as a local celebrity. The prophet Tiresias predicts a long life for him 'unless he learns to know himself'. The boy's beauty

ensures he is known and admired by many, but countless are rejected. Echo, spurned, is reduced to mere voice. Another, rejected, curses him not to gain the thing he loves.

Narcissus' 'incomparable' beauty does not save him from the displeasure of the gods, it condemns him, and his 'untouchable' reflection proves to be no substitute for an actual relationship. Ovid is very clear about the message the reader should take from the tale. If you don't want a 'futureless' relationship, you had better hope there is something beneath the surface.

In his tales Ovid has successfully and empathetically portrayed a huge spectrum of recognisable emotions, manipulating the modern reader as easily as any Roman and influencing the way we think and behave. If myths in general are timeless, Ovid's versions have not just survived, they have flourished. Ever metamorphosed they continue to hit the spot.

Rebecca Tatlow is in the upper sixth at Edgbaston High School for Girls. For this year's Gladstone Prize see p. 33.